

Nuggets from the Past
Foresthill Divide Has Its Ghosts
By Norman McLeod

How many true ghost towns are there on our Foresthill Divide? Most were old gold mining settlements, some we know today by their names only, others have disappeared completely—name, location and everything.

Long-vanished towns we know by name and approximate location are Bath, Bogus Thunder, Humbug Bar, Miller's Defeat, Chicken Hawk, Star Town, Hell's Delight, Last Chance, Yorkville, Young America, Todd's Valley, Brushy Canyon, Succor Flat, Bake Oven, Sunny South, Bullion, Derby, Damascus, Byrd's Valley, Deadwood and Butcher's Ranch. There were others we know nothing about, that have vanished from history except for preserved descriptions by old timers who once visited their sites but who left no names or exact locations.

For example, in 1851 a Reverend Joseph A. Benton, a pastor from Sacramento, explored the Foresthill Divide between Auburn and Foresthill, including Shirt Tail Canyon. He stopped at the cabin of a miner friend. They later walked down to the river bar where the reverend was shown a settlement with a thousand miners. The minister wrote later, "It was evening and lights were dancing thickly about and men were passing to and fro in all directions. The drinking shops were all wide open. As we were passing, a noise and outcry drew us to the farthest quarter, close under the hillside. Here was one of the stateliest buildings the place could boast. Two rooms took up the whole lower story. The front one was a lounging or sitting room with a bar in it and the back one was a dancing room. There were scores of men here, as lookers-on or revelers in dissipation. In the rear apartment were miners and others with unkempt hair and long beards, stamping through the dance with perfect wildness and abandon, amid clouds of dust and with such companions as vulgar, smoking, spitting, painted, swearing females.

"Between the sets all adjourned to the bar, steaming and sweating and dusty, to refresh themselves with horrid liquors. In the sitting room was the postmaster and deputy sheriff playing cards with their favorite courtesans. On the piazza was the principal doctor with a senorita on his lap.

"We all turned away from the scene, filled with sadness. It appeared to us like the hole of the pit, like a cave of witches and hags in an orgy."

Reverend Benton did not name the town. History books do not record it. It vanished without leaving a trace. We know it could not have been Hell's Delight as that town was not located on a river bar.

My wife and I recently were guests of Annie Robinson who resides at the end of Big Dipper Mine Road. Adjacent to her property is the beginning of Shirt Tail Canyon. According to Annie there was once a mining town named Shirt Tail situated not far from her place. In fact, she pointed out the spot above the river where Shirt Tail Hotel once stood. Today the hotel and the town are both ghosts.

In the December 1971 issue of True West Magazine is an article by a Kenneth Roe who claimed much of his boyhood was spent on the Foresthill Divide. Fascinated by its history, he employed many hours in his search for lost towns. He described one such settlement located between Auburn and Foresthill that, in his words, "became a refuge for the country's roustabouts. When law-conscious citizens could no longer tolerate the ruffians who had free reign, the latter formed their own camp.

"According to legend, gamblers, thieves, gunmen, cheats, prostitutes and even gangs converged here, bringing back loot collected from raids on surrounding communities. The place roared 24 hours a day. The story is told that two men, noted leaders, began competing for power. Soon the camp split into warring factions and an all-out battle resulted. 'Blood ran thick,' the legend claims. When it was all over, havoc reigned with neither side emerging victorious. The battered survivors drifted on, leaving the place to the coyotes." Roe continued, "Such a tale stirs the blood of any historian and of any ghost-towner. How much is truth?

I have searched the old archives, newspapers, personal diaries and the like but have never chanced upon a word about this town or of this incident. However, I've been told by several old timers that they visited the spot in the early 1900s. They recalled a cluster of shacks peppered with lead—doors and window rims literally packed with bullets. They recalled cutting out the smashed lead with their pocket knives. What is the complete story? How much is fancy? How much is fact? Perhaps some reader knows.”

Could such a town as this have existed between Auburn and Foresthill? I can't imagine where. The largest such settlement was Butcher's Ranch and by all accounts it was a peaceable place.

As though lost ghost towns are not enough, how about topping it off with the tale of a lost gold mine? In 1850 Thomas Duncan entered the region through the headwaters of Shirt Tail Creek. He later confided to his new mining partners that in the higher passes he'd discovered a fabulously rich lode but too large to develop by himself. "I'm willing to share it if you will lend me your muscles," he grinned. With a "Hallelujah!" his partners threw down their pans. Duncan assured them he could relocate the lode with no problem. It was in a canyon near a grove of big trees. They found the grove with little effort, not knowing the trees were the giant sequoia nor that the isolated grove (six trees still standing) was the northernmost stand of the species in the state.

Beyond the grove, Duncan stated, lay the sought-after canyon. But once beyond the grove, he became confused. The ravines and ridges all looked alike. For days the little party wandered with Duncan growing increasingly befuddled. His companions, worn out by their exertions and by this time very frustrated and suspicious, threatened to shoot him if he didn't locate the lode, and fast.

Fortunately for Duncan, his partners stumbled upon another deposit of gold, smaller than hoped for but promising enough for them to overlook, for the present, their resentment of him. During their early digging he managed to escape. He was never seen again on the divide. With typical miners' humor they named the place Duncan Canyon. Somewhere near to or on its ridges still lies, perhaps, the lost gold mine of Thomas Duncan.

Ghost towns? Lost gold mines? If looking for them is your favorite hobby you don't have to go much farther than the Foresthill Divide.

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